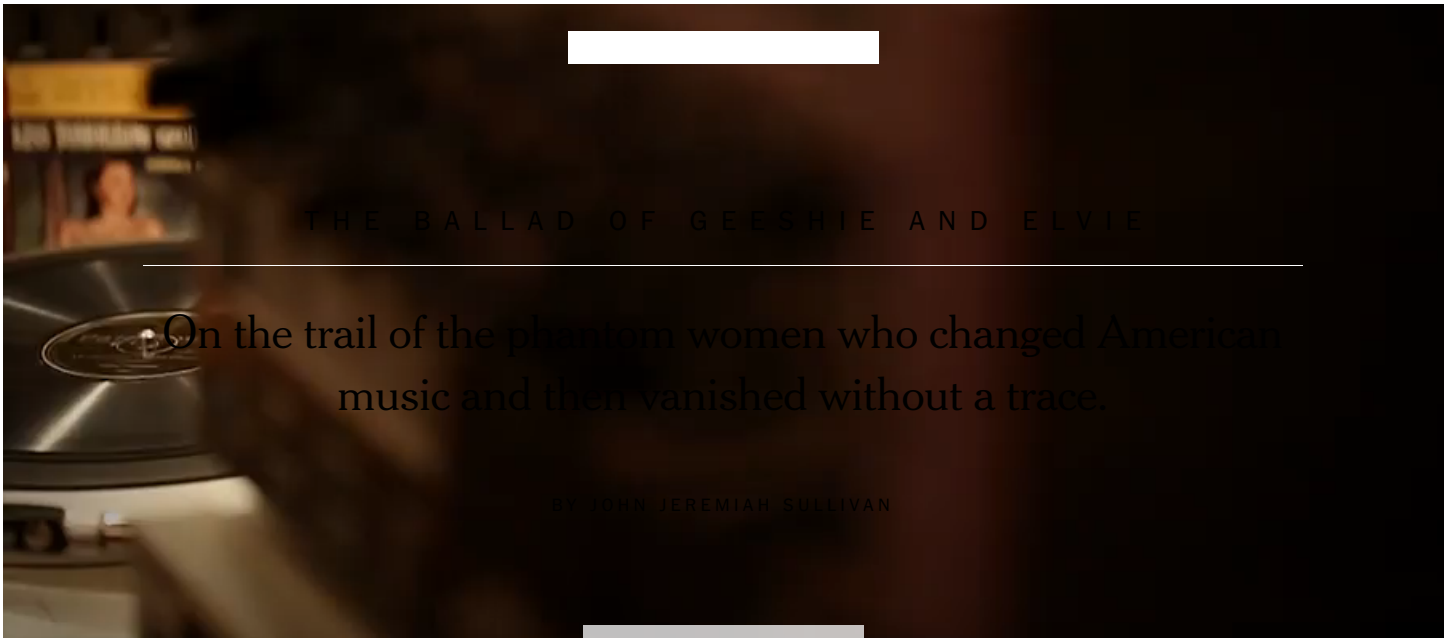

THE BALLAD OF GEESHIE AND ELVIE

On the trail of the phantom women who changed American music and then vanished without a trace.

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IN THE WORLD of early-20th-century African-American music and people obsessed by it, who can appear from one angle like a clique of pale and misanthropic scholar-gatherers and from another like a sizable chunk of the human population, there exist no ghosts more vexing than a couple of women identified on three ultrarare records made in 1930 and '31 as Elvie Thomas and Geeshie Wiley. There are musicians as obscure as Wiley and Thomas, and musicians as great, but in none does the Venn diagram of greatness and lostness reveal such vast and bewildering co-extent. In the spring of 1930, in a damp and dimly lit studio, in a small Wisconsin village on the western shore of Lake Michigan, the duo recorded a batch of songs that for more than half a century have been numbered among the masterpieces of prewar American music, in particular two, Elvie's "Motherless Child Blues" and Geeshie's "Last Kind Words Blues," twin Alps of their tiny oeuvre, inspiring essays and novels and films and cover versions, a classical arrangement.

Yet despite more than 50 years of researchers' efforts to learn who the two women were or where they came from, we have remained ignorant of even their legal names. The sketchy memories of one or two ancient Mississippians, gathered many decades ago, seemed to point to the southern half of that state, yet none led to anything solid. A few people thought they heard hints of Louisiana or Texas in the guitar playing or in the pronunciation of a lyric. We know that the

word “Geechee,” with a c, can refer to a person born into the heavily African-inflected Gullah culture centered on the coastal islands off Georgia and the Carolinas. But nothing turned up there either. Or anywhere. No grave site, no photograph. Forget that — no anecdotes. This is what set Geeshie and Elvie apart even from the rest of an innermost group of phantom geniuses of the ’20s and ’30s. Their myth was they didn’t have anything you could so much as hang a myth on. The objects themselves — the fewer than 10 surviving copies, total, of their three known Paramount releases, a handful of heavy, black, scratch-riven shellac platters, all in private hands — these were the whole of the file on Geeshie and Elvie, and even these had come within a second thought of vanishing, within, say, a woman’s decision in cleaning her parents’ attic to go against some idle advice that she throw out a box of old records and instead to find out what the junk shop gives. When she decides otherwise, when the shop isn’t on the way home, there goes the music, there go the souls, ash flakes up the flue, to flutter about with the Edison cylinder of Buddy Bolden’s band and the phonautograph of Lincoln’s voice.

I have been fascinated by this music since first experiencing it, like a lot of other people in my generation, in Terry Zwigoff’s 1994 documentary “Crumb,” on the life of the artist Robert Crumb, which used “Last Kind Words” for a particularly vivid montage sequence. And I have closely followed the search for them over the years; drawn along in part by the sheer History Channel mysteriousness of it, but mainly — the reason it never got boring — by their music.

Outside any bullyingly hyperbolical attempts to describe the technical beauty of the songs themselves, there’s another facet to them, one that deepens their fascination, namely a certain time-capsule dimension. The year 1930 seems long ago enough now, perhaps, but older songs and singers can be heard to blow through this music, strains in the American songbook that we know were there, from before the Civil War, but can’t hear very well or at all. There’s a song, Geeshie’s “Last Kind Words,” a kind of pre-blues or not-yet-blues, a doomy, minor-key lament that calls up droning banjo songs from long before the cheap-guitar era, with a strange thumping rhythm on the bass string. ▶ “If I get killed,” Geeshie sings, “if I get killed, please don’t bury my soul.” There’s a blues, “Motherless Child,” with 16-bar, four-line stanzas, that begins by repeating the same line four times, ▶ “My mother told me just before she died,” AAAA, no variation, just moaning the words, each time with achingly subtle microvariations, notes blue enough to flirt with tonal chaos. Generations of spirituals pass through “Motherless Child,” field melodies and work songs drift through it, and above everything, the playing brims with unfalsifiable sophistication. Elvie’s notes float. She sends them out like little sailboats onto a pond. “Motherless Child” is her only song, the only one of the six on which she takes lead to my ears — there are people who think it’s also her on “Over to My House.” On the other songs she’s behind Geeshie, albeit contributing hugely. The famous Joe Bussard (pronounced “buzzard”), one of the world’s foremost collectors of prewar 78s, found one of two known copies of “Motherless Child” in an antique store in Baltimore, near the waterfront, in the mid-1960s. The story goes that Bussard used to have people over to his house to play for them the first

note of “Motherless Child,” just the first few seconds, again and again, an E that Elvie plucks and lets hang. It sounds like nothing and then, after several listens, like nothing else. ▶ “Baby, now she’s dead, she’s six feet in the ground,” she sings. “And I’m a child, and I am drifting ’round.”

Before there could be the minor miracle of these discs’ having survived, there had to be an earlier, major one: that of people like Geeshie and Elvie ever being recorded. To understand how that happened it’s needful to know about race records, a commercial field that flourished between the world wars, and specifically the Paramount company, a major competitor in that game throughout the 1920s.

THE STUDIO
The Paramount Records factory and recording studio in Grafton, Wisc., circa 1915. Alex van der Tuuk Archives

A furniture company, that’s how it started. The Wisconsin Chair Company. They got into making phonograph cabinets. If people had records they liked, they would want phonographs to play them on, and if they had phonographs, they would want cabinets to keep them in. The discs were even sold, especially at first, in furniture shops. They were literally accessories. Toys, you could say. In fact, the first disc “records” were manufactured to go with a long-horned gramophone distributed by a German toy company. So we must imagine, it’s as if a subgenre of major American art had been preserved only on vintage View-Master slides.

In 1920, when the white-owned OKeh label shocked even itself by selling hundreds of thousands of copies of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” (the first blues recorded by an African-American female vocalist), the furniture-phonograph complex spied a chance. Two populations were forming or achieving critical mass, whites willing to pay for recordings of black music and blacks able to afford phonographs, and together they made a new market. It’s around then that the actual phrase “race records” enters the vernacular. In 1926, Paramount had game-changing luck on a string of 78s showcasing the virtuosic Texas songster Blind Lemon Jefferson — his “Long Lonesome Blues” sold into the six figures — and as in Mamie Smith’s case, he touched off a frantic search among labels to find performers in a similar vein. The “country blues” was born, though not yet known by that name. It was men, for the most part, but with an important female minority, a “vital feminizing force,” in the words of Don Kent, the influential

collector and poet of liner notes.

For the preserving of that force we have to thank not the foresight of those recording companies but their ignorance and even philistinism when it came to black culture. They knew next to nothing about the music and even less about what new trends in it might appeal to consumers. Nowhere was this truer than at Paramount. These were businessmen, Northern and Midwestern, former salesmen. Their notions of what was a hit and what was not were a Magic Eight Ball. So, when the mid-1920s arrived, and Paramount went looking farther afield for new acts, they compensated by recording everything and waiting to see what sold. Not everything, but a lot. A long swath of everything. The result was an unprecedented, never-to-be-repeated, all-but-unconscious survey of America's musical culture, a sonic X-ray of it, taken at a moment when the full kaleidoscopic variety of prerecording-era transracial forms hadn't yet contracted. Hundreds of singers, more thousands of songs. Some of the greatest musicians ever born in this country were netted only there. It was a slapdash and profit-driven documentary project that in some respects dwarfed what the most ambitious and well intentioned ethnomusicologists could hope to achieve (deformed in all sorts of ways by capitalism, but we take what we can get).

Among the first to wake up to these riches was, as it happens, the most prominent of those great ethnomusicologists, Alan Lomax. He had been traveling the back roads with his father, John A. Lomax, making field recordings for the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song, and he had seen firsthand that all of this culture, which had endured mouth-to-ear for centuries, was giving way, proving not quite powerful enough to resist the radio waves and movies. In the late '30s, Lomax was record hunting one day and came across a large cache of old Paramount discs in a store. At the time they were a mere 10 or 15 years old and couldn't have appeared less valuable to a casual picker. Lomax listened, transfixed by an increasing realization that Paramount offered him an earhole into the past, into the decade just before he joined his father on the song-collecting scene, an enormous commercial complement to what the two of them had been doing under intellectual auspices with their field-recording. Lomax started digging. In 1940 he created a list, with the title "American Folk Songs on Commercial Records," and circulated it in the folklore community.

This list is a very precious little document in 20th-century American cultural history. It was published in only a limited library report, but copies were passed around. It marked the first time someone had publicly recognized these commercial recordings as something other than detritus. Most important, it made space for, even emphasized, the more obscure blues singers.

To grasp the significance of that, you have to bear in mind how fantastically few record collectors possessed such an interest at the end of the 1930s. Early jazz was a thing in certain hip circles, but only a few true freaks were into the country blues. There was twitchy, rail-thin Jim McKune, a postal worker from Long Island City, Queens, who famously maintained precisely 300 of the choicest records under his bed at the Y.M.C.A. Had to keep the volume low to avoid complaints. He referred to his listening sessions as séances. Summoning weird old voices

from the South, the ethereal falsetto of Crying Sam Collins. Or the whine of Isaiah Nettles, the Mississippi Moaner. Did McKune listen to Geeshie and Elvie? It's unknowable. His records were already gone when he died — murdered in 1971, in a hotel room. Another early explorer? The writer Paul Bowles. The Paul Bowles, believe it or not, who started collecting blues records as an ether-huffing undergraduate in Charlottesville, Va., in the late 1920s, "at secondhand furniture stores in the black quarter." Out West there was Harry Smith, who went on to create the "Anthology of American Folk Music" for Folkways Records, the first "box set," of which it can be compactly if inadequately said: No "Anthology," no Woodstock. Wee, owlish Smith. He and McKune came to know each other. No less important, they both came to know Alan Lomax's list, which galvanized their passion for this particular chamber of the recorded past, giving shape to their "want lists."

In the '50s McKune would become a sort of salon master to the so-called Blues Mafia, the initial cell of mainly Northeastern 78-pursuers who evolved, some of them, into the label owners and managers and taste-arbiters of the folk-blues revival. An all-white men's club, several of whom were or grew wealthy, the Blues Mafia doesn't always come off heroically in recent — and vital — revisionist histories of the field, more of them being written by women (including two forthcoming books by Daphne Brooks and Amanda Petrusich). Still, no one who seriously cares about the music would pretend that the cultural debt we owe the Blues Mafia isn't past accounting. It's not just all they found and documented that marks their contribution. It's equally what they spawned, whether they would claim it or not. Dylan didn't listen to 78s, after all, on the floors of those pads he was crashing at in Greenwich Village, but to the early reissue LPs. By Dylan I mean the '60s. But also Dylan. "If I hadn't heard the Robert Johnson record when I did," he wrote 10 years ago, "there probably would have been hundreds of lines of mine that would have been shut down."

THERE WAS, in those early days, another individual, one less easily slotted into the Wikipedia story line of blues history. A young man named Robert McCormick, who went by "Mack." In Ohio as a teenager, he fell under the wizardry of jazz, listening to the bands at a nearby amusement park. The musicians, he learned, were invariably curious about the availability of certain species of contraband; he knew where to get it and found that this could put him pretty much anywhere, into any room. He had a mind bent in the direction of curating undervalued things. In his teens, he went to burlesque shows, presumably the only one in the audience with a notebook, and wrote down accounts of the comedy skits, stock bits with vulgar names, the Pickle Caper, things no one would have thought to remember, and possibly no one did, but they're in McCormick's files.

From the musicians, he got the idea that if you wanted the realest jazz, you had to go to New Orleans, so when he wound up in East Texas after the war and found himself within hitchhiking distance of the city, he started making trips there. He became a regular at a place called the New Orleans Record Shop, on Baronne Street, run by a journalist and pioneering discographer named Orin Blackstone. Blackstone knew that McCormick was going back and forth to Texas, so he asked him to keep his eyes peeled for old records there. Before the war, they made recordings in Texas, he said, in "field studios," hotels, warehouses. He showed him the labels to be on watch for, what they looked like. He dubbed McCormick the first-ever Texas editor to the Index to Jazz. It was 1946.

CULTURE GATHERING Mack McCormick, right, and record executive Chris Strachwitz in South Texas in early 1963, where Strachwitz was working on a documentary about blues music. Mack McCormick

That unofficial knighting launched one of the postwar period's most storied careers in American cultural fieldwork. Searching for records led to searching for the people who made them, and McCormick had natural gifts when it came to approaching strangers and getting them to talk, or if they could, to sing and play. He had a likable, approachable face, with pronounced ears and intelligent eyes. He took a job with the census, expressly requesting that he be assigned the Fourth Ward, the historic African-American neighborhood in Houston settled by freed slaves who migrated there from all parts of the South, where he knew he would find records and lots of musicians, going house to house. The fables of his research are legion. He drove unthinkable miles. At one point he started traveling county by county or, rather, he started moving in a pattern of counties, from east to west, marking a horizontal band that overlapped the spread of slavery west from the Atlantic colonies. He investigated 888 counties before he was finished. He asked about everything, not just music but recipes, dances, games, ghost stories, and in his note-taking, he realized that the county itself, as an organizing geographical principle, had some reality beyond a shape on the map, that it retained in some much-diminished but not quite extinguished sense, the old contours of the premodern world, the world of the commons, how in one county you would have dozens of fiddle players, but in the very next county, none — there everyone played banjo. He began to intuit a theory of "clusters," that this was how culture worked, emanating outward from vortices where craft-making and art-making suddenly rise, under a confluence of various pressures, to higher levels. Elaborating that theory would be his great work, or part of it.

He never elaborated the theory. It's frank, but I don't think unfair, to say that he won't. He's in his mid-80s; his health is shaky. His archive of tapes and transcripts is a labyrinth even to him. He calls it the Monster. He has been open, too, about a lifetime's battles against psychological obstacles, specifically a sometimes paralyzing bipolar disorder. The mania that drove him to those superhuman exploits of cultural questing could turn on him and shut him down when it came time for the drudgery of organizing facts and notes. You can find a very moving "open letter" from him, published in Blues Unlimited in 1976, saying, essentially, "Help"; saying, "I've gathered this material, this data, and it has swallowed me." In one letter he mentions having been made aware, at a recent meeting of the American Folklore Society, that certain people in the community were upset with him, because he was hoarding so much knowledge. He'd uncovered more than almost anyone, about this music they worshiped, yet he had published less than almost anyone. It was holding them back, holding the discipline back. But what did they want him to do? Give it away? It was his work.

He has given a lot away over the years, most famously in the case of Robert Johnson. You know Johnson: hellhounds, crossroads, death by poison. Have you heard of a man who has a picture of Johnson no one has ever seen? That's McCormick. The story goes that they're in a safe place in Mexico, where McCormick lived for a period. Peter Guralnick, whose "Searching for Robert Johnson" has a permanent place on the high shelf of writing about the blues, saw the pictures. McCormick let him.

Guralnick very openly and graciously makes clear in the notes to his book that it draws deeply on McCormick's research, and was meant, in fact, to lay the groundwork for what McCormick had gathered and put together about the singer's life. Guralnick sent a copy of the book to McCormick when it was published, with an inscription that said, in a gentle way, "Here's my book, now it's time for yours."

Guralnick's book came out 25 years ago. McCormick, needless to say, hasn't finished his own. He is on record (in one of two or three notably good profiles done on him over the years) as saying that the subject of Johnson has gone dead on him. And he has said since that part of him wishes he hadn't let that one singer, that riddle of a man, consume him. Which is a human thing to feel . . . except for when you happen to know more than anyone on earth about a subject that loads of people in several countries want to know more about. Then your inability to produce becomes not just a personal problem but a cultural one. It's plausible that the scope of research finally got too large for any one mind, even a uniquely brilliant one, to hold in orbit. The point here is not to accuse or defend him, but rather to point out that even his footnotes, even the fragments from his research that have landed in other scholars' pages, have been enough to place him among the two or three most important figures in this field. He's one of those people whose influence starts to show up everywhere, once you're sensitized to it.

FIELD WORK

Despite the scope and the significance of Mack McCormick's research, he acknowledges that his life's work will never be completed.

When I first corresponded a couple of years ago with McCormick, who is still living in the same modest ranch house in northwest Houston where he has been for decades, he began by asking if I could help him find out what happened to Orin Blackstone. They'd lost touch, evidently, and McCormick feared that somehow his mentor had come to an unhappy end. I rooted around some and eventually found an article from The International Association of Jazz Record Collectors Journal, paying tribute to Blackstone, who died in Louisiana in 1980. One source quoted in the article said that later in life, Blackstone "had become very bitter." McCormick's response to the news was muted. "Thanks for the Orin Blackstone article, which answers my questions about him," he wrote. I told him I would be in Houston in a few months, and we arranged a visit.

I arrived at his house on a small, silent street after midnight. I had been at an event downtown all evening, but McCormick had told me he routinely stays up until 4 a.m., that these were decent receiving hours for him. I approached his front door in the dark. A yellow light came on. A little sign read, "If it isn't one o'clock, don't knock."

He opened the door from his wheelchair, then rolled backward and let me in, saying that he could walk some, but with difficulty, and that it had become hard for him to get out of bed. He used a kind of swinging harness apparatus to do it. But his handshake was firm, and his half-smile was full of the reputed charm. He seemed completely there.

We sat up for several hours, drinking screwdrivers. There was a black-and-white movie on, something from the '40s. He had a fat little dog named Charles, who has since died, that he loved very much. Charles would drink your screwdriver, if you set it on the floor, and McCormick kept having to remind me to put my notepad or a book on top of the glass, so Charles couldn't get to the drink. Now and then McCormick would pause and send me to locate a binder or folder. Mostly he talked, not tediously but spell-bindingly. His recall was encyclopedic, though he frequently cursed his memory, saying he had suffered a small stroke. Yet he roamed through years and names, stopping to ask if you had heard of some person, carrying on heedlessly whether you said yes or no.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

One of the many contact sheets in McCormick's files. Mack McCormick

He had said he didn't want to talk about Robert Johnson, for personal reasons and on principle. But his talk spiraled inexorably toward Johnson anyway. The singer loomed over his memory as he had over his career. What he told me took me aback. McCormick said that what he realized, in the quarter century since Guralnick's book came out, was that most of what we think we know about Robert Johnson — which is to say, most of what McCormick thought he knew — was highly unstable. We're not even sure, McCormick said, that the man in the pictures we have, the smiling man with long fingers, holding the guitar, is Robert Johnson. Or that he is, as McCormick put it, "the guy who made the records." He is a Robert Johnson. But according to McCormick, the more he has lived with the evidence, the more he doubts. Of the people he interviewed so long ago, more than one of those who had met Johnson and been present at one of his two sessions in Texas told McCormick, when they were shown the famous photograph, "That's not the guy." It didn't look like him, they said. Not everyone said that, but a few.

What about the death certificate, discovered by the mad Mississippi 78-hound and prolific blues researcher Gayle Dean Wardlow (much as McCormick took a job with the census, Wardlow took one in pest control)? There were problems with the death certificate, McCormick said. You had to look at the back of it. The Robert Johnson identified there was a banjo player. It says, “banjo.” He added that you had to remember how many men were called Robert Johnson, and how ready to hand it would have been for a singer who needed a professional name. There were other historical proofs (or supposed proofs) I offered — David (Honeyboy) Edwards’s testimony, for example — and each one he dismantled with a detailed exegesis. He was saying that we didn’t know how little we knew. Could be him in the pictures. Couldn’t prove that it wasn’t. But McCormick didn’t think so. There were weaknesses in his argument, too, and he didn’t try to conceal them. They bothered him, which made what he was saying more compelling and more startling.

I’m not a Johnson expert by even the most forgiving definition, and it was not always easy to follow McCormick’s verbal hypertext. At times, too, I experienced queasy flashes of suspicion, partly because it seemed impossible that everyone could be wrong about a figure so central to the tradition. Was this a form of subconscious sabotage on McCormick’s part? A narrative: He hadn’t written his Johnson book; others’ books on Johnson would have the last word . . . unless, that is, he could pull the rug out from under the whole field. He still comes out master of the chase. His unwritten Johnson book would enact some Borgesian supersession of the ones that had been written.

My gut said it wasn’t that, though. He seemed too unhappy about it all. His tone said he wished he could skip saying these things. A tone not of ironically regretful satisfaction, but closer, maybe, to embarrassment. Was that the reason he hadn’t said this on the record before? Perhaps he felt he had misled us all? And again, just to be clear, he wasn’t saying that everything we thought we knew was flat wrong, only that our faith in it needed to be downgraded by a more-than-symbolic percentage. In the end, the most we could hope for was a kind of less-ignorant fog into which the guy who made the records receded.

This is all to say that my mind had already been Rubik’s Cubed around by McCormick, when he abruptly picked up a sheaf of papers, four or five pages, and held them out to me. “I found these,” he said. “They should interest you.”

I don’t remember if we had talked about Geeshie and Elvie or if he knew I had an interest in them. I wrote some pages on them once, on having worked as the fact-checker for an essay about Geeshie that Greil Marcus published 15 years ago. If McCormick had read my article, he didn’t mention it. We must have discussed them.

MACK AT HOME
McCormick in Houston, in December 2013.

He bent forward in his recliner, elbows on his knees. I looked down at the papers. These were apparently photocopies of notes and letters. But the originals that had been photocopied were themselves old, typewritten, from the early 1960s. One was a transcript of an interview with a musician identified as Leon Benton. At the top of the notes, in a header, it said that McCormick had located him in the Acres Homes section of Houston. It was 1961, the year after Mack worked the census in the Fourth Ward, and he was following leads generated there. “And during this same period in the early 1930s,” Benton was saying, “there was a woman guitar player named L.V. Thomas who also lives out here in Acres Homes now. I worked with her a good deal. In fact for a time we had a group with two guitars and a violin — that was myself, Leroy Johnson and L.V. Thomas. She put out some records. She was as good as any man with that guitar.”

L.V.

Down another paragraph: “L.V. Thomas has done just like me, she’s joined the church and doesn’t fool with music any longer. That’s a bad life. I like to hear music but it pulls you in the wrong direction. It’s sporting life and helling around and sure trouble coming with it.”

At some point I looked up. McCormick was sipping his screwdriver, twinkling a bit. Savoring my speechlessness. “Keep reading,” he said.

The next page was a copy of a letter addressed to Paul Oliver, the much-esteemed English blues historian, who is McCormick’s longest and most important collaborator. Oliver’s book “Songsters and Saints” was the first serious work on prewar black music that I ever read and still one of the most illuminating. Pretty

much everything Oliver wrote on the subject is, by definition, essential. “Paul,” it began. “I got a live one! A 70-year-old woman blues guitarist and singer — who recorded for Paramount. She is L.V. Thomas who recorded solo and with her partner Lillie Mae ‘Geetchie’ Wiley in 4 days at Milwaukee, Wis.” In the margin, McCormick had written in black marker, “Prob. Grafton, Wis.?” It continued: “Miss (?) Thomas is old and could be — if she will — a most valuable informant. She is a sweet old lady but is reluctant to talk about blues or music. . . . Anyhow she’s been playing guitar since she was eleven years old — in 1902! And working, earning money since 1908. Thus everything has to [be] pried out of her most gently else she decide I’m the devil incarnate.”

It was 2 in the morning. I’d never spent much time in Texas, and the overcast spring night outside pressed enormously on the roof and windows. I scanned back up the page and found the name again. Lillie Mae. The true name of Geeshie Wiley. A thing I’d wondered about more than half my life but had never allowed myself to imagine anyone would ever actually see or know. McCormick had known it for more than 50 years.

And “Elvie” was L.V.? Or was it instead the case that McCormick hadn’t known who she was when he found her, hadn’t heard her records yet (none of them had been reissued by 1961) and so wrote her name as “L.V.,” when in fact she meant “Elvie”?

I said several sputtery things. He expressed mild surprise at my overreaction. He seemed unaware that Geeshie and Elvie had developed a following. I asked if he had seen “Crumb.” He said he didn’t know it. Twenty years, I suppose, was not a significant number for a man who had been chasing these ghosts for almost 70. The Monster was boxed and shelved in the room directly behind him. It could be full of revelations like these, for all anybody knows. For McCormick, my overly narrow preoccupations on certain singers hinted of amateurism (correct). He didn’t fetishize. He didn’t go in for that. It was about bigger things. The clusters. He had allowed himself to become consumed like that once, with Robert Johnson, “carried away with some kind of peculiar enthusiasm,” he said, and look what happened. He wasn’t going to get worked up about a couple of minor blues women whom some wannabes had decided to build a shrine around.

Still, McCormick couldn't have been unaware, or at least not stayed unaware, for such a long time (*half a century*), that people were identifying Geeshie and Elvie with Mississippi, which has long possessed a unique aura in the blues world. Nor was it dilettantes doing the identifying, but some of the most notable curators and reissuers of that music. Songs by Geeshie and Elvie show up on multiple Mississippi-themed compilations, among them “Mississippi Blues” (Belzona, 1968), “Mississippi Girls” (Document, 1988) and “Mississippi Masters” (Yazoo, 1994). There are researchers — I know one of them from my time living in Mississippi — who have spent thousands of hours crisscrossing the state, looking for the smallest bent twig left behind by the two women. There are even, it should be added, a few whose ears were sharp enough to hear betraying hints of Texas in the music — figures like Don Kent, who argued years ago that the guitar in "Last Kind Words" employs "a riff normally associated with Texas artists," or the

collector Chris King, in Virginia, who one night was "listening to some interviews/ recordings of convicts in a work camp from around Huntsville, Tex.," and noticed that their unusual pronunciation of the word "depot," as DAY-poe, matched Geeshie's own.

What was Mack thinking, during all that time? Was he laughing? Was he taking a dark satisfaction in watching the errors pile up, errors that he knew he would one day sweep away? Maybe he just didn't know what to do, what to say.

THE COLLECTORS

The handful of people who own Geeshie and L.V.'s records — and Amanda Petrusich, who has written about these collectors — discuss the music and the myth.

It's funny to think that Mack, the person who found them, or preserved the information of who they were, alone encountered them with absolutely no mystique. When Leon Benton told him about this woman in Acres Homes who could play guitar but had given it up for the church, that's all Mack knew, and that's the woman who was in his head all those years, while the rest of us were constructing a faceless ideal. He met L.V. She even showed him a picture, that first day, of herself when she was young. "Very nice-looking at that period," he recalled.

Did he have anything else? Had he made a transcription of those interviews?

Yes, he said, he knew he had it somewhere. But he couldn't find it. His papers looked organized, from the outside, they weren't messy, but there were tens of thousands of pages. And photographs? Thousands of them, scattered through which are images of people we have no other images of. Multiple clashing archival code systems had been brought to bear over the decades, but then half- or partly finished, and now they existed in skeins on top of one another. The entrance to the labyrinth had been walled up, closed even to the one who had the clue.

FOR SOME MONTHS, I kept in sporadic contact with McCormick, and through a friend in Arkansas, got in touch with a young woman, a 21-year-old undergraduate, curious about the old music, who said she was willing to drop out of school for a year to help Mack. She came complete with the made-up-seeming name of Caitlin Rose Love. With the blessing of her school, she packed her bags and moved to Houston.

It didn't work out between Mack and Caitlin. I won't go into why; it's their business. Nothing unseemly. She had "ideas" about what they should accomplish, and he needed someone who would sit there and do what he said. Fair enough. She, for her part, may have felt there was a lot of storytelling time for a project she had changed her life to help move forward. Didn't he understand the urgency, after all? But a person couldn't bring that up. Didn't need to. Hadn't he written

himself, in that open letter in 1976, addressing his writer's block and the singular problem it presented for the field — namely that you couldn't tell the story of the blues without Mack McCormick, and you couldn't tell it because of him — "a related problem that may help explain my personal conflict is the pressure of death and the passage of time." He fired her.

He lost a beloved wife to cancer when she was still young. He has a daughter, who is married and comfortable. She's not interested in the blues and perhaps can't help resenting it for all the times it took her father away, but she loves the man, as I learned the hard way when I called her in an attempt to get her to reason with him. It was the last straw for Mack. He didn't like that, my calling his daughter. He wrote me a letter saying thanks for trying, then stopped communicating.

A night came when Caitlin was sitting on the balcony of her apartment in Houston. It was too late to go back to school. She felt judged and rejected in some unarticulated way, and instead of having jumped a few spaces on the board of life, she had been forced to put the game on pause. I tried to help her see that whatever had played into Mack's decision-making had little or nothing to do with her, that it was larger than that. At some point I asked if she'd ever seen, in the time she worked with Mack, anything with the name "L.V. Thomas" on it?

She had, yes. A folder.

Good sense said it was the letters he'd already shown me and to breathe.

No, it was notes. It was a couple of interviews. There was also a tape box, one of those boxes that says "Scotch," with her name on it.

Did she remember anything about the notes?

"I took pictures of them."

I asked him about the fate of those pages a dozen times since that first night at his house, to a degree that in hindsight was pushy. Had he deliberately left these papers in the open in order to test her? Still, it was hard not to feel that he arranged for this little disclosure, even if the pea was very many mattresses down in his psyche.

Minutes later, scans were coming through of old yellowed pages. Typescript, ring-binder holes in the left margin. "L.V. Thomas . . . Interviewed June 20, 1961." It was late and everyone else in the house was asleep. L.V. Thomas spoke. He found her, in Acres Homes, and approached her gate, and she let him in. He was 30, she was about to turn 70. He found her "dried up and shrunken," such that the next time he visited, five months later, he was at first surprised that she was still alive. She told him she was born in August 1891, in Houston. "I was born right down here at 3116 Washington Avenue," she said.

She continues: “I started playing guitar when I was about 11 years old. There were blues even back then. It wasn’t so big a part of music as later but there were blues. I can’t hardly name them — I don’t know that those songs had a name. One song was, ‘Oh, My Babe Take Me Back,’ and another was ‘Jack O’ Diamonds.’ There was a lot of set pieces, stuff that’d be called for dancing, that everybody learned. . . .

“But in 1937 I joined the church so I gave up all I ever did know about music. I joined the Master and followed after him and gave up all my music since 1937 and I hate for you to ask me about my sinful days. I’m a member of the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church out here in Acres Homes and that’s the only place I do any singing anymore.”

The two interviews went on for four single-spaced pages. They silently vacuumed out the story of Geeshie and Elvie as it had existed and been accruing conjectural details in my head for 20 years and replaced it with something utterly different. L.V. spent her whole life in Houston. Born into a large family, she says, she was at first the only one interested in music. Some neighborhood boys she ran around with, “They had guitars and liked to fool with them, so I guess they kinda got me started.”

THE TRANSCRIPT
Part of McCormick’s transcribed 1961 interview with L.V. Thomas.

L.V.'S MOUNT PLEASANT
An undated photo of the original Mount Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church, where L.V. Thomas often sang. Mount Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church

Among my first thoughts, while reading the transcripts, was: this could be fake. Not even in the sense of a forgery, but in the sense of a joke. Maybe Mack decided he didn't like me and figured he would detonate my cerebellum for fun before going back to the seven books he has in the works. Or maybe it was even more complicated than that. Maybe it was a "History of the Siege of Lisbon"-like thing; maybe he was tinkering with the machinery of reality, because he could, or to settle some balance. Other major blues people I spoke with warned me of the same. "I'd be very careful," one said. Another said, "that sounds like fantasy."

The only way to know if the documents were real was to check them against reality. And we had this lucky situation, a catastrophic situation that might be turned to good use. Caitlin was stranded in Houston. I'd still never met her, but the photorealistic detail of her dispatches from inside the Monster had been enjoyable to follow, and I admired the bravery of her act of quasi theft, feeling strongly that it was the right thing to do. You're not allowed to sit on these things for half a century, not when the culture has decided they matter. I know he didn't want to sit on them — he was trapped with them. I give us both a pass. Caitlin had no job. Mack had been her job. But we had these pages, a grand total of nine, the letters and the transcripts. And we had a full-time, on-the-ground researcher/reporter in Houston, whom fate happened to be catching smack in the midst of her own budding Geeshie-and-L.V. enthusiasm. If Mack wouldn't talk to us anymore, we would do this as an assignment for him, we would follow his leads. Caitlin started barnstorming government offices, where old records are kept. Libraries and archives. Back-office experts she was referred to, small-town historical societies, basements with open shelves. It was jealousy inducing — I'd always dreamed of doing blues research like this, the way they did it back in the '50s, the way Mack had done it. I knew what he meant now when he said that what he did wasn't research, it was search. She was searching. And after some

weeks, she started finding things; L.V.'s will, some tax records. And after more weeks, we had enough data between us to start crossing the streams of what Mack had given us (or withheld from us), and not only did everything that McCormick had claimed to hear in 1961 check out; it started to multiply.

The year 1891: the Mauve Decade. Benjamin Harrison is in the White House. Famine in Russia, civil war in Chile. Oscar Wilde is writing "Salome" in Paris. Aug. 7, the day L.V. Thomas is born: Walt Whitman is alive but depressed and eating a bowl of ice cream that he later decides was too much for him. He'll die in about half a year. An old German woman is attacked with a razor blade on a street in London, causing people to fear that the Ripper has returned, but it emerges that she had been trying to fake her own murder, so that her son could collect insurance money. The Knoxville Journal reports that the coming Grocer's Association Picnic will involve, as No. 13 in its list of entertainments, "Throwing eggs at Negro's head." The Cincinnati Enquirer reports that a Dr. Ege of Pennsylvania has "succeeded in transplanting the skin of a Negro to the arm of a white person." The Charlotte Democrat reports that the Rev. Dr. Ebenezer Judkins of Houston, Stonewall Jackson's brother-in-law, has fallen dead on a railroad train, and on Washington Avenue, at some unknown hour, L.V. is born.

The house she was born in is listed as "vacant" in the city directory, which adds that her family was living in the "rear." It's most probable that her father was a man named Peter Grant, and that her name at birth was L.V. Grant. The name Thomas seems to have come from a short-lived marriage very early in her life, in her early teens, to a man who in the absence of a marriage license eludes us.

So, L.V. Thomas was first L.V. Grant, her mother evidently a woman named Cora. We know only a few things about her childhood: that she left school after the fifth grade, and that around the same time, at the age of 11 or so, she started playing the guitar. At some point L.V.'s mother, whether or not she was ever married to her father, married a man named Chris King, who "played all the string instruments," she says. "Mandoline mostly, but guitar and banjo, too. He didn't go out to the country suppers but mostly played in saloons here in Houston."

The country suppers: Mack had written about them, in his notes to the "Treasury of Field Recordings" liner notes, 1960, the year before he met L.V. They were picnics on Saturdays that would last all day and night. "I guess I was about 17" — it was 1908 or '09 — "when I started going out playing at country suppers," L.V. says.

Something goes wrong. A 1910 census taker finds her an inmate in the Harris County Jail. For a serious crime? If you were black in Houston in 1910, it was not hard to get arrested for doing nothing. She was working as a dishwasher, the census says. Any records related to the arrest or any trial that took place are gone.

JAIL TIME
L.V. Thomas listed as an inmate at the Harris County Jail in 1910, when she was 18.

When she gets out — after years or a day — she's still playing music, and not just that, but she's playing with someone major, a singer whose name figures highly in any serious effort to get back through the veil of early recording and hear what the blues might have sounded like on the other side, Alger (Texas) Alexander. "One time Texas Alexander wanted me to go out to West Texas with him, but I didn't like to be away," she says. "I used to play for Texas sometimes down on West Dallas Street or go out to suppers with him." Alexander: small, dark and handsome, with a voice that could fill a noisy barroom or a canyon, as occasion demanded. Musicologists consider him precious, because his singing was very close to the fields. He didn't play an instrument, just sang, beautiful wavering songs, and he did with tempo what he wanted. When the race-record people found him and recorded him, starting in 1927, they supposedly had to work to find accompanists who could handle playing in "Alexander time." Texas Alexander: My God, L.V. had backed him? In two sentences she leapt from the edges of the tradition to the center. All of a sudden at the country supper in my mind, Texas Alexander walked through. Which meant that so did Blind Lemon Jefferson (they worked together). The little boy leading Blind Lemon by the hand and passing the cup for him is T-Bone Walker. We are here in this meadow. It's an environment where any kind of hybridization could happen.

"I remember one night was a big party," L.V. says, "when Sippie Wallace came back to town and all the songsters came together. It was like a contest of a kind. Everyone sang a number, and the audience would call for who they wanted to hear some more and I remember they pulled everyone out but me. Seem like they wanted to hear me most of all."

The ghost had shown up at a singing contest and outsung Sippie Wallace. And L.V. was not a bragging woman. "I was out in the world when I made those records, but now I don't want to talk about it," she says. He asks her about "Last Kind Words Blues," which he'd never heard, at that point; all that had transpired, Geeshie and Elvie-wise, in 1961, is that they were name-checked six years earlier in Jazz Monthly, and the Blues Mafiosi had heard them, become interested in them. But Oliver sent McCormick a manuscript of some kind that included the lyrics, and Mack read them to her. "I guess it could have been one of my songs," L.V. said. "Lots of them I made up."

On no subject did her guardedness frustrate him more than on that of Geeshie,

her partner. “One thing,” he had written to Oliver in those first letters he gave me, “it appears there was some trouble between she [sic] and Geeshie Wiley and the story here would be quite a tale I suspect, if it can [be] unearthed.” He went on, “Most aggravating of all is the fact that L.V. Thomas apparently know[s] something more of [Geeshie’s] present whereabouts than she will offer.”

L.V. did give him some scraps on Geeshie during those two afternoons at her house. “The way I came to make records,” she said, “was that I went around a lot with a girl named Lillie Mae Wiley. She was called Geetchie Wiley.

“Mr. Laibly of the Paramount record company came to her house one time, and she carried him on over to see me. He listened to me play, and he listened to her, and then he said he’d like for us to go up North and make some records. We knew about his company. I think we both had some Paramount records, and we’d heard of others going up there. I was the older. I was about 38 or so then, so I said all right.”

Arthur Laibly. A peripatetic salesman who worked his way up in the company and often gets a bad rap for having essentially presided over Paramount’s implosion, though he couldn’t really help the Depression.

WHERE RACE RECORDS FLOURISHED
Another view of the Paramount Records factory, circa the mid-1930s. Alex van der Tuuk Archives

McCormick asks how Laibly found her and Geeshie. “I don’t know how Mr. Laibly heard of her,” she says. “I suppose someone down at the music distributing house told about us. We had a pretty good name as two girls to hire for music.”

I got in touch with Alex van der Tuuk, a generous and much-esteemed Dutch blues historian, who knows as much about Laibly as anyone alive. He said that Laibly would regularly pack up his car with fresh Paramounts and go on long trips through the South, visiting the record “houses” that sold race records. In one of those stores he must have asked, “Who’s good, who’s worth recording?” And the guy at the counter says, “You need to check out these two girls, Geeshie and L.V.” The guy must have sung their praises. They’re the only musicians Laibly recruits

during this trip to Houston, that we know of. It's doubtful anyone would have turned him down. He sets out for Geeshie's house, 1205 Saulnier Street, the house where she must have written or at least worked on "Last Kind Words Blues."

Lillie Mae (Geeshie) Wiley. For the first time her silhouette holds steady in front of the lens for a moment. Sharing a house with her husband, a man named Thornton Wiley, who worked at a metal shop around the corner. She was young, 21 or 22, no children. Laibly knocks on her door.

"At the very first I started going out alone," L.V. says. "I played all by myself. Then my first partner was Lillie Mae."

That was in the early 1920s. They may have met at one of the country suppers, where they couldn't have missed each other's playing. "When I first met up with her, she was all alone," L.V. says. "She was from some country place" — one census document says Louisiana, born there around 1908 — "and living here in Houston when we got together."

In the rooming house on Ruthven Street where L.V. lives, they sit and play for Laibly. Their best stuff, no doubt. The lovely and sinister ▶ "Skinny Leg Blues."

I got little bitty legs, keep up these noble thighs,
I got little bitty legs, keep up these noble thighs,
Aah, keep up these noble thighs.
I got something underneath, and it works like a boar hog's eye.

Laibly puts them on the train. "Lillie Mae and I went up there to Milwaukee," L.V. says, where their train ride would have ended. You had to go by car or tram the extra 20 or so miles north to Grafton, where the studio and pressing plant were.

The year 1930. Segregated cars. April: wildflowers in the fields. Seeing the first true cities they've ever seen. The front page of The Chicago Daily Tribune reads, "Bull Gets Blues." The true crash of the Depression is underway.

I asked Alex van der Tuuk to help me reconstruct their arrival in Wisconsin, what would have been most likely to happen, when they got off the train. How close could we get to a little movie, sticking to only what we know?

It was cold, about as cold as they'd ever felt. Ice floes had jammed the Milwaukee River, causing a flood in Grafton, where they were scheduled to record the next afternoon. It's possible that they had to wait a few days until it thawed.

They would have most likely taken the tram to the recording studio and been driven back by a man named Alfred Schultz, the pressing foreman at the Paramount plant. Schultz was a young, narrow-faced man who had worked his way up at the company over a decade. Van der Tuuk wrote a very good minibiography of him for Vintage Jazz Mart some years back, based on interviews with his daughter. He was well liked, and the company noticed he got along easily with the singers from the South.

Paramount didn't usually keep the black musicians in Grafton. It was an all-white

town of mostly European immigrants. The company often housed them instead at a boardinghouse in Brewer's Hill in Milwaukee. They go up the next day by tram, up the Lake Michigan shore, with glittering blue-glass views of the lake to the right as they rode.

They pull into a tiny town with a water wheel on the river, to power the plant.

INSIDE PARAMOUNT
The record company's plating factory, circa 1920.
Alex van der Tuuk Archives

The studio building was a reddish structure, described by everyone who saw it as "like a barn." There are no photographs of the studio interior, but Van der Tuuk, in "Paramount's Rise and Fall," skillfully layers the memories of musicians who remembered it. The space is divided into two rooms, the control room and the performance space. There's a wall between them with a door and window in it and a red light that comes on when the artists are recording. There's an upright baby grand piano. The room is cold and damp. The windows were "draped with burlap and blankets" to reduce the reverberation. Thick carpets on the floors. A dark, furred box. A horrible place to record.

They would have been offered illegal liquor, but not too much, just enough to limber them up.

The recording equipment itself, as reconstituted by Van der Tuuk, was a strange liminal beast that probably should have never lived. It was electrical, but it looked acoustical. You sat and sang into a giant wooden horn that was two feet wide at the mouth and eight feet long. The horn was meant to focus and direct the sound toward an electrical microphone. At the beginning of the '30s, the engineers were having a hard time working the turntable on which the original wax masters were created; there were electrical problems. So they went back to a weight-and-pulley system, from the old days, to turn the plate. After every song, the engineers would have to jump up and raise the weights again. We may be able to hear the eccentricities of the weights and pulleys in the way the speed seems to change slightly about two-thirds of the way through "Motherless Child Blues."

Another nice detail: Schultz's daughter, Janet, not yet 4, is impossible to keep out of the studio. The Schultz house is nearby. She has learned "very quickly to be quiet so I could be with my dad." So, there's a little girl in the corner, when Geeshie and Elvie record "Motherless Child Blues" (though not, you would hope, when they record "Eagles on a Half," with its earthy exhortation, ▶ "Squat low, papa, let your mama see,/I wanna see that old business keeps on a-worrying me").

There they sit. Two guitars. Laibley's there. Schultz is there. The light comes on.

That fearsome A minor. Buzzards circle. Dark clouds form in the little muffled cave. Mack McCormick is in the womb.

They recorded on four consecutive afternoons. L.V. remembered "dozens of songs," but that was probably high. Certainly more than six. After each session Schultz would take the records to a "test room," where he sat and listened to the songs. After each record, he wrote the name and song title on a white label, adding terse reviews.

L.V.'s thumb, thumping on her bass string. "She'd sing one, I'd sing one," she told McCormick, "and each of us would bass for the other." She uses "bass" as a verb like that. It has caused me to hear the six songs in a new way, to know that this is how they conceived of their arrangement; it's part of what makes their sound so distinctive.

"I didn't hear too much back" from Paramount, L.V. tells McCormick. "We never did get any royalty money or anything from those records. Just what they paid then."

Something minuscule but determining occurs: Laibly, or Laibly and Schultz, one or both of them, changes the spelling of L.V.'s name. "It's just the letters L.V.," she says, "that's all the name I got but he made it out 'Elvie' someway." Maybe he wanted to make sure customers knew it was a woman on the song; two women playing guitars (unusual).

A RARE 78
A recording of "Motherless Child Blues," owned by the collector Richard Nevins.

As he writes the five letters, he presses a long, invisible blade down between two destinies, hard enough to cut them off from each other for 80 years. There will be Elvie, a singer, who lives nowhere, and L.V., a woman, at her house in Houston. They call her song "Motherless Child Blues," even though it doesn't have those words anywhere in it, and the woman singing, in the song, is not an orphan, so that when 31 years later Mack finds her and asks about that song, she doesn't know what he's talking about, she never had a song called "Motherless Child Blues."

And Geeshie? Where did that name come from? "I called her Geetchie," L.V. says, "and that's the name Mr. Laibly decided to put on the records. I was the one started calling her Geetchie — I just picked that for her name." An affectionate way of calling her a hayseed, more or less? Blacks in parts of the South still use it that way. Maybe Lillie Mae talked funny, being from the country, from somewhere in Louisiana.

"I haven't seen her since 1933. I left her in Chico, Okla. Something like Choco . . . Chico. We'd gone out playing around together, traveling, and I left her up there and came on back."

McCormick has penciled in the margins, "Checotah, Okla.! South of Muskogee."

You can tell from the transcript that he keeps asking about Geeshie, where she could be.

“Last I heard of Lillie Mae was about four or five years ago,” L.V. says. “She was supposed to be in West Texas then.”

So, L.V. was still aware of her, almost 30 years after she’d seen her last.

What about her name, before she married this man, Thornton Wiley? How was she born? Lillie Mae something. Lillie Mae what? “I can’t think of her name before she was married,” L.V. says.

She tells McCormick that she has bread in the oven, and is “anxious” for him to “leave her alone.”

He has acquired tape recordings of the songs since the first time he’s seen her, maybe through Oliver, and wants to play them for her, wants her to hear their music again, to see if it jogs anything.

“All that’s gone out of my mind and I don’t want to bring it back.”

I GOT A TEXT from Caitlin at about 5 in the evening that said “!!!!!!!” Then another one that said, “Check your email.”

She was digging around at the genealogical library out there. Houston has a very good one.

I opened the message and the attachment. It was an official form, like a birth certificate. No, a death certificate. State of Texas. Thornton Wiley. Not that exciting. Not “!!!!!!!” Of course he died. Wait, though — it was from 1931, just a year after she was living with him on Saulnier Street in the Fourth Ward. Not long after they made the records. He died young. That was sad. Maybe she loved him, despite L.V.’s seeming distaste for his character. Maybe she is thinking of him in “Last Kind Words” when she sings, ► “What you do to me, baby, it never gets out of me/I believe I’ll see you after I cross the deep blue sea.” I’m reading down through the crowded handwriting. “Inquest.” “Homicide.” He had been murdered.

Manner of injury: “Stab wound in between collarbone and neck.”

His brother is listed as the informant. He told the police what happened, or a version of what happened. They were out in Fort Bend County, outside Houston, on a farm near a place called Fulshear, maybe at a country supper. But he’s listed as single, so he and Geeshie had recently split.

Then the form got to the cause of death. “Knife wound inflicted by Lillie Mae Scott.”

Six months of work to learn more about the murder came to nothing. There wasn’t a scrap of paper. The inquest records are lost. I communicated with a lawyer in East Texas who’d worked on similar cases, murders of husbands by

wives, not this long ago but 50 years ago. He said that very often, the police were so indifferent to the reason a particular black male had been killed, they would happily accept a self-defense theory, if one were put forward. Easier night. Let 'em stab each other. On the other hand, this was a particularly violent one, the knife from above, into the neck at an angle, one cut and deep enough the first time to kill. Also, the brother had been the informant to the police, so it's doubtful they received a sympathetic account of her reasons for killing him. Maybe they did arrest Lillie Mae. Or maybe they tried to arrest her, and she ran away, with L.V., to Oklahoma. And maybe she stayed away.

Up in Grafton, on ▶ "Skinny Leg Blues":

I'm gonna cut your throat, baby,
Gonna look down in your face.
I'm gonna let some lonesome graveyard
Be your resting place.

Lillie Mae's trail seemed to end there, or with L.V.'s vague "out West." She had slipped away again, replacing one ghost with another. There are graves of Lillie Mae Scotts in Texas and Oklahoma, and Lily May Scotts, and Lilly M. Scotts, and maybe one of them is hers, and maybe none of them are. Maybe she changed her name completely, or maybe she kept the name Wiley. She could be alive. She'd be about 106; it happens. Maybe you are reading this and you have a great-grandmother named Lillie Mae who told you once that she used to sing and make records. Or maybe nothing. That might be best. That she stay Geeshie, but more so. Lillie Mae of Louisiana was better than myth; she was a mystery. She was the one who had ghosts.

"SKINNY LEG BLUES"

Geeshie and L.V.'s song manages to simultaneously titillate and threaten murder.

JUST AS WE were thinking the research had reached a natural plateau, L.V.'s did something we hadn't expected, climbing out of the file cabinet and into the world. Caitlin was talking to people who'd known her. Looking back, I know this shouldn't have been earth-shattering, I don't know why we hadn't hoped for it. If she were alive today, she would be 122. Maybe she seemed too remote. And in McCormick's interviews, you got the sense that she knew or saw very few people and was isolated.

But there was also that one sentence, in the transcripts, suggestive of tethers to a community: "I'm member of the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church out here in Acres Homes, and that's the only place I do any singing anymore."

Acres Homes is a remarkable part of Houston, a big flat area in the northwest part of the city, unincorporated forever, and has historically had a mostly African-American population. It's like a big patch of rural land that the city in its

expansion oozed around amoeba-style. When I visited there later, it was startling to see guys going past in full urban hip-hop gear, caps and braids, low-slung pants and new sneakers, cellphones out, only they were seated on chestnut mares, with their girlfriends behind them, trotting by.

Mount Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church still stands there, in a building within sight of the spot where it was when L.V. attended. Caitlin started going regularly. The people were exceptionally welcoming, well beyond what the code of Southern interracial church politesse demands. The women called her Sister Love. When the time for announcing visitors came, that first day, the pastor, Calvin Randle, recognized her presence and asked her to introduce herself. She gave a very touching unprepared speech that I listened to on MP3 the same night.

It turned out there were several people at the church who remembered "Sister L.V. Thomas" — or "Mama Thomas," as others called her — beginning with Randle, who alone of the people we've managed to contact knew her in the Fourth Ward, from after her conversion but before she left the neighborhood where she and Lillie Mae played blues together.

Randle remembered her voice. Everyone remembered her voice.

SISTER THOMAS

Decades after her death, L.V.'s fellow worshipers remember her — and the sound of her voice — at Mount Pleasant.

L.V. lived near the church. A fiercely independent woman. One of her former neighbors said: “You know how some women gotta have some help, have a man around? She didn’t have to have one.”

Another thing people at Mount Pleasant talked about consistently were her clothes. Her bulky, orthopedic-style shoes. It didn’t seem like a thing to notice, necessarily, about an elderly lady, but there was something that came along with it, a vibe, with how often people brought it up. We got stray physical details from other people. Dark colors. Long skirts, sometimes, but more often, pants. Hair always “kind of pulled back.” A “very plain” brown hat. She was short, “maybe about five feet tall.”

Sometime later, we went to her grave. It was easy to find, once you had her death certificate. We called the cemetery, still in business. They looked up her name. The directions to her grave were these: “Cemetery Beautiful, Avenue Love, Row Paradise.” A simple stone, almost level to the ground. Her name and dates written across an engraving of an open book. And beneath, “The Lord is my light and salvation.”

RESTING PLACE
L.V. Thomas's grave site.

THERE WAS ONE small memory that people in Acres Homes had that nagged us for some reason: That L.V. used to bring a little boy to church. No one remembered his name or knew who he was, only that he would come with her and sit there next to her.

Months went by, and Caitlin added to her pile of interviews, but we kept wondering about this boy. A couple of people thought he might have been family somehow. Eventually, Caitlin reached a Sister White, who didn't want to talk to us, but did say that L.V. had surviving family. No one else in the church had mentioned this. She even had a name: Robin, in California. She gave us a number.

Robin Wartell, in Los Angeles. A singer. Sang backup for P-Funk and is currently singing backup for Lakeside, of "Fantastic Voyage" fame ("Slide, slide, slippety slide . . . "). There's a video of him, shot on Skid Row, in which he discusses his struggles with addiction and his spiritual rebirth. There's also a video of him doing one of his original songs, "Will I Still Have Tomorrow?"

I called him. "Robin Wartell?"

"This is Robin."

"Have you ever heard of a woman named L.V. Thomas?"

"Auntie L.V.?" he said, emphasizing the V, the way she did. "That's my auntie!"

I told him we'd heard that she used to bring a little boy with her to church.

"That was me!"

He had lived with her, off and on, it turned out. His mother had been a "party girl." His father walked out on them. He and his brother Randy (who later died of AIDS) were often dropped at Aunt L.V.'s house in Acres Homes for safekeeping.

“She was a big influence on me,” he said. He remembered that she smoked a lot, and that she wore pants, and that (tantalizingly) she kept a guitar in the house. “She always encouraged me,” he said, “when other people didn’t take me seriously.” His mother, Dally Mae Wilkerson, was one of the closest with Aunt L.V. and became her caretaker. “She’s really the missing link here,” he said. She inherited a box of pictures from L.V. — the ones Mack had seen, no doubt, of L.V. (and maybe Geeshie?) from younger days — but those were lost when his mother died and they paid someone to clean out her house (too painful): That person probably threw everything away.

I got a text from him one night when I was in Cincinnati, visiting my mother. It had a little picture attached.

I opened it and looked into the eyes of L.V. Thomas.

THE REMAINING POLAROID
Currently the only known photograph of L.V. Thomas.
Robin Wartell

A Polaroid. Robin had put the image on the sofa and taken a picture of it with his own phone.

She was in a wheelchair, it appeared. I looked at the mouth — thin-lipped, pursed — that had sung “Motherless Child Blues.”

I tried forcing myself, through an almost physical mental exertion, not to project momentousness onto the picture. People’s faces often get caught in weird

moments. But there was no doubt that her eyes were full of profound melancholy. The other thing you see immediately are her strikingly long fingers.

She has them folded in her lap. Her skin is reddish-brown, precisely the color of the stain on the wooden lectern that Pastor Randle had pointed to in telling us what color she was. Her straight white hair flowed back from her high forehead in a small mane. It is not a flattering picture. She was already dying when it was taken. But it is a very moving picture of an important woman, and our only photograph of a great American artist (again provisional on what Mack has in the Monster).

A month later we worked with Robin to organize a little family reunion in Shepherd, Tex., at the home of one of L.V.'s great-great-grand-niece's nieces. The hostess's name was Holly Bennett. Her husband was a retired firefighter. She very generously opened up her house for the afternoon, at the last minute, and invited a bunch of family in, people who remembered L.V. We sat in a circle in the Bennetts' living room. Robin's sisters, Pauline and Charlene, were there, and another woman of their generation, a cousin named Mary Alice. We played them the songs. "Pick Poor Robin Clean" came on, with its curious opening, eight seconds of minstrel-show banter, possibly part of a stage act Geeshie and L.V. had perfected.

THE REUNION

In Houston, members of L.V.'s family come together to listen for the first time to her songs and recall the woman they knew.

At that last line, three of the women sitting there did a sudden jump forward in their seats. “That’s her voice!” Pauline, Robin’s sister, insisted. The other two nodded. They were mostly silent for the songs, and shook their heads afterward, murmuring. I was at first disappointed, having hoped in some reptilian journalistic way for tears, but something more interesting was happening. They were unsettled. They said, “Beautiful.” They’d known L.V. She wasn’t a phantom artist to them but a woman, not always an easy woman to get along with, and she was their blood. These were some of the people who helped care for her when she was dying. And here I was, presenting them with a hologram of a creature named Elvie, who sang and played on these piercing blues, and I was saying, “Same woman!”

Our interviews at the church had given us a silhouette. Her family filled it in with bold, bright strokes. They told us that she rolled her own tobacco — Kite brand, in a green pouch — but that she also sometimes smoked a corncob pipe. She carried a pistol under her apron, a long-barreled “old type” of pistol. Robin stood and up and did an impersonation of her locking up the house at night. Staggering stiffly around in the nightgown, with the long pistol dangling in her hand. She would sing while doing the dishes and cleaning. Her house had no running water. She didn’t trust banks and kept her money in the outhouse, under the planks. She liked to hunt possums and chopped her own wood. She was “almost a man,” they

said. Had I heard that she used to jump trains? She was turning back into a folk figure, only all of it was apparently true.

In the middle of our talk, Patricia Ware tapped me on the shoulder and said there was someone on the phone who wanted to speak with me, her cousin Gwen. I went into the dining room. She first told me some of the things the others had said. Then she changed her tone. “L.V. was a strange person,” she said.

I told her that, yes, I’d gathered that she was a loner.

“Better word,” she said, “hermit.” She told me that when she’d gone with her father, Tommy Grant, L.V.’s nephew, to drop off groceries there sometimes, they didn’t go past the gate.

L.V.'S LAST HOME The house in Houston where Thomas lived in her final years, near the Mount Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church. Robin Wartell

“L.V. estranged herself from our family,” she said. “Because of her lifestyle.”

What did she mean, lifestyle?

“She dressed like a man,” she said. “Do I have to say anything more?”

I said I didn’t think so. But did she know anything more about it? Had she ever known L.V. to be with a woman?

“I never saw it, no,” she said, “but I wasn’t allowed in her yard!”

She added, “But I’m sure about that. . . . I’m absolutely sure about that.”

I ran it past a few other members of the family, not that day but later. All pronounced some variation on, “Well, we always sort of figured.”

There is a woman, whose identity I had wondered about at length but made no headway on, a woman named Sarah. L.V. was living with her in 1920, when she worked at the oil mill. They are listed as cousins, but Sarah’s family had come from another part of Texas than L.V.’s, and they shared no family names. In the 1940 census, the one Alex van der Tuuk found, they’re together again, listed as cousins again. Her name is Sarah Goodman Cephus or Sephus now. In the intervening years, she married a man with that name, but he abandoned her (very

publicly — there was a trial, over his debts). Now she and L.V. were living together again in the Fourth Ward. No one in the family or at the church had ever heard of this woman. So that's 20 years of her life, minimum, that they knew each other, and L.V. had lived with her for at least two stretches. There was a place for lesbians in the blues world. Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Gladys Bentley, Ethel Waters, many others — you can't tell the story of the early blues without the lesbians. And according to the music historian and gospel producer Anthony Heilbut, whose "The Fan Who Knew Too Much" gets into these questions, there was a place for lesbianism in the gospel world as well. I wrote to Heilbut and asked him what he thought about L.V. He knew "Motherless Child Blues" well and said he was confident that any black person listening to it in the late 1920s would have recognized her delivery as "butch." But would the church have made a place for her? Could you be both?

I got a message from him a few weeks later. "In the last two weeks," he wrote, "I've asked seven or eight gospel old-timers (late 70s, early 80s) about Those Hard Baptist Women with their 'sisters' and 'daughters' and received such replies as 'Forever.' 'Shaddap' . . . and 'You know it, baby.' In other words, yes."

Sarah Goodman Cephus died in 1967. L.V. Thomas was the informant on the death certificate. She signed it, in a clear but ever-so-trembly hand. That's about 50 years that we know they knew each other.

L.V. and Geeshie? Is that why she had to kill Thornton, had he found them together? It is interesting that, as Greil Marcus said to me, Geeshie doesn't change the line in the "Pick Poor Robin" song, "Gamblin' for Sadie, she is my lady." A slender clue! Anyway, whether or not she was a lesbian is the least of Geeshie's withholdings. L.V. comes out of it all an indelible character, but Geeshie we don't know.

Does Mack know more? It's the biggest burning question for me, the one that I wake up once a month in the middle of dreaming about. There are intimations that he does. He mentioned to me, that night a year ago, that he had picked up rumors of Geeshie in Oklahoma, and several years ago he told the writer Ted Gioia that he "visited Wiley's home, and met with members of her immediate family while doing fieldwork in Oklahoma." McCormick told me that she had Cherokee blood. In those letters to Paul Oliver, he also says that he has "been to see L.V." again, and "managed to get on a lot better ground with her." So, there may be more on Sister Thomas, too. Pictures, tapes. The only thing sure is we don't have it all.

I don't know if Mack will be angry. Certainly, during the months we worked on this, there were times when I felt angry at him. It would happen every time we heard (and we heard it over and over): "I wish you'd gotten here" — fill in a number — "years ago! So-and-so could have told you all about her." I would shake my fist at Mack a little inside. Thief of souls! If we had known about this discovery in 1961 — or in '71, '81, '91, '01, or even 2011 — our knowledge of these two artists would be larger by an order of magnitude, and we might have a real notion of Lillie Mae, instead of coordinates. And yet Mack was the only reason we found

any of it. The dualism of the man was defeating, finally. It can't have been easy for him to carry.

Also — the truth I forget more often than any other, in thinking about this — L.V., too, wanted it hidden. Or at least part of her did.

A few weeks ago, Caitlin got in touch with a woman in Houston named Jana, who hadn't been invited to the family reunion (by oversight, not intention). She lived with her father, John D. Wilkerson, who goes by Don, and her mother, Elnora, taking care of them. Don, she said (the family confirmed it) had known L.V. better than about anyone, but his mind was mostly gone. Just in the last two years, it had slipped precipitously. But he enjoyed passing windows of clarity, during the day.

Jana allowed Caitlin to come out, and Caitlin went back to Houston one last time (she was re-enrolled in school in Arkansas). Mr. Wilkerson was foggy, as warned, but he did something very important, the moment Caitlin walked into the room. His daughter told him that this young woman was here to ask about L.V. Thomas. "You want to talk about Slack?" he said.

Caitlin hadn't played him any of the songs yet. There was no way for him to know that, at the beginning of "Pick Poor Robin Clean," Geeshie calls her that. He said he gave her the nickname. Couldn't remember what it meant.

With that single word from his mouth, "Slack," Wilkerson sets falling an interesting chain of dominoes. This establishes beyond doubt, you see, that it's L.V. playing with Geeshie on "Pick Poor Robin Clean." Which proves in turn that the song was recorded in 1930 — because L.V. is emphatic about there having been only one session, or series of sessions ("[We] made all of our records at that time") — and not recorded in 1931, as has been discographic wisdom since the 1950s.

That wasn't all Don Wilkerson said. He told Caitlin that he was once a Texan saxophone player, and that he always considered L.V. to have been his "musical mentor." Jana watched them all play together, when she was a girl, she said. Don's mother, "Big Mama," would play piano, Don would play the sax, L.V. would play the guitar. And they did play blues.

THE MUSICAL DESCENDANT
A recording of Don Wilkerson's "Low Down Dirty Shame."

Jana went into another room and got a 45 that her father made, in Los Angeles, on the unknown Tomel label, a song called "Low Down Dirty Shame." She gave it to Caitlin, who, when she got home, put it on the turntable. She held her phone to the speaker. ▶ Don Wilkerson's voice burst out. ▶ "It's a low, it's a low low, it's a low down dirty shame." It was her! It was her in him. The first line of "Eagles on a Half." Almost the exact same stuttered delivery. They must have played it together one of those nights.

He remembered Geeshie. He is in his 90s, his memory is mostly gone and there is a very good chance that he is the last man on earth who can say that he remembers Lillie Mae (Geeshie) Wiley, knows who she is and has seen her face (unless Mack found her). He implied that there was something funny about her background. He said that she'd been "maybe Mexican or something." That was it. But he saw her, he remembered. He was someone we almost didn't talk to, because people had said it was too late.

Correction: May 4, 2014
An article on April 13 about the singers Elvie Thomas and Geeshie Wiley misidentified the song they recorded with the lyrics "Squat low, papa, let your mama see." The song is "Eagles on a Half," not "Skinny Leg Blues."

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THE MUSIC

Listen to Geeshie and Elvie's six songs.

Provided by Revenant Records.

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- ▶ Skinny Leg Blues Geeshie Wiley — download mp3
- ▶ Motherless Child Blues Elvie Thomas — download mp3
- ▶ Over to My House Geeshie Wiley and Elvie Thomas — download mp3
- ▶ Pick Poor Robin Clean Geeshie Wiley and Elvie Thomas — download mp3
- ▶ Eagles on a Half Geeshie Wiley and Elvie Thomas — download mp3

A MODERN ARRANGEMENT

- ▶ Last Kind Words Blues Kronos Quartet, scored by Jacob Garchik

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